

# Boosting transit helps us all

The level of traffic congestion in our county frustrates all of us. It's time for bold action on numerous fronts to tackle this problem.

We need road and transit improvements, transportation demand management, and increased use of carpooling. We need more telecommuting, staggered work hours, and compressed workweeks. And we also need to make the most of our existing mass transit infrastructure, in which we have invested billions of dollars, by making transit cheaper and more convenient.

Four decades ago, our current Metrorail system was still a dream in the mind of a few far-sighted planners, community leaders, editorial writers and elected officials. Now, it is impossible to imagine our region without Metro. It provides more than 500,000 trips per day, a number that is steadily growing. Nationwide, transit use is growing at a rate greater than automobile use, with 9 billion trips in 1999.

Recently, I suggested the county consider eliminating fares for Ride On, the county's bus system, and to explore the possibility of persuading Metro to substantially reduce fares charged to Metro riders. Eliminating fares or reducing fares substantially will result in increased ridership according to both economic theory and actual experience here and in other communities.

For example, the number of young people using Ride On in the county has more than doubled since monthly passes were reduced from \$20 to \$10 for people 18 years old or younger — and revenue to the county from the program has actually increased since the fare cut. Recognizing the link between fare price and ridership, County Executive Duncan recently announced that students 18 years old and under can ride free on Ride On from 2 p.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Friday.

In State College, Pa., the number of people riding buses from Penn State University into town increased by 250 percent when the fare was eliminated last year.

And in our region, Metrobus ridership jumped 13 percent — about 60,000 more trips — when transfer fees were eliminated last June.

Boosting mass transit benefits all of us — whether we are willing or able to leave our cars behind or not. Why? Because every driver we move from our clogged roads onto a bus will help relieve congestion, and improve our region's air quality by reducing automobile emissions — the



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## Commentary

main cause of air pollution in our region. And let's not forget that building roads is very, very expensive.

I am pleased that the council is poised to give final approval to a recommendation of our Transportation and Environment Committee to slash the cost of the two-week unlimited pass and 20-ride Ride On passes from \$18 to \$10. If the council approves this initiative, it is critical that adequate funding be provided to promote and evaluate the program.

After the council completes action on the FY 01 operating budget and the capital improvements program, I intend to work with my colleagues to develop additional proposals to increase transit ridership. All possibilities will be on the table — from adding routes, increasing the frequency of service, and providing shelters at bus stops to reducing or eliminating Ride On fares.

Although more work needs to be done before the council formally considers eliminating Ride On fares, there would be several advantages to going that route. The county would save \$8.4 million over two years that Ride On plans to spend in the next four years on new fare collection machines on the buses. Another benefit of eliminating fares would be that riders could board more quickly, thereby reducing route time and increasing efficiency. Moreover, cash fares require employee time to secure and to process.

Still, the primary benefit is the power of dramatic action to change behavior. "Ride free on Ride On" would be an easily understood message. I would like nothing better than for the county to face the "problem" of having to purchase more buses to handle increased ridership. It's worth a long, hard look.

I welcome comments from readers about this issue. My e-mail address is phil.andrews@commd.us, and my office address is 100 Maryland Avenue, Rockville, MD 20850.

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